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Darvil Meets Little Black Sambo in Nebraska—A Poetry Performance

Charles Fort

University of Nebraska at Kearney

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Darvil Meets Little Black Sambo in Nebraska—A Poetry Performance

Charles Fort

University of Nebraska at Kearney

“Rarely acknowledged, my character becomes invisible out of necessity. The range of my poems is a result of my life and teaching.”

Rarely acknowledged, my character becomes invisible out of necessity. The range of my poems is a result of my life and teaching. I taught for three years at Xavier University in New Orleans, a predominantly black and religious institution. My other eighteen years were at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, University of Hartford, Hartford Community College, Bowling Green State University and Southern Connecticut State University. These were private and public universities. I have taught wealthy as well as first generation working class students. At two universities, I was Director of a Creative Writing Program for a total of nine years. I now hold an endowed Chair at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. The campus is nearly lily (as well as the community), a rare breed for a professor from any background.

One of my students wrote this poem for me during my first semester:

The Art of Breathing

By Adrian Miller

For Professor Charles Fort

The man is black; a rare color
in vanilla Kearney, even rarer
for a professor, of poetry nonetheless!
The palm of his hand is pink,
like the inside of his eyes.

Through thick, dense teacup glasses
set on a strong African nose, he peers
across at students in section Two.
Someone begins to ask a question

and Charles' thick maple syrup
voice pours, spiced with thought
and emotion, out to interrupt.
A bad joke. A Northeasterner,
he is unsure of how to behave
in the confines of Midwestern style,
to joke and laugh with students

and convey his spirit in strong
strides as he is surely used to.
His soul, in its deep forest depths,
matches the shade of a man
whose every breath is poetry.

The Worker

By Charles Fort

The father was a barber-surgeon
for thirty-nine years from nine to five,
a factory worker on the night shift
from eleven p.m. to seven a.m.
for thirty-eight of those years,
and a landlord in our three-story
tenement twenty-four hours a day.

On Saturdays it seemed as if
the entire Negro section of town
had grown long hair.
The sounds of shears still vibrate my ears.
I swept clouds into the wastebasket.
The back room contained hard whiskey
bookies and hidden magazines.

When my father came home at seven a.m.
lifting his black aluminum lunch box,
we seven children met him at the door,
knelt, and untied his shoes.
His tired eyes burned lines
into the side of that box.
Each of us wanted left-overs;
we grew older and took turns.
Steel ball-bearings turned in his hands given to us as marbles
and the largest on the block.

They made my father a supervisor.
His white friends for thirty years
now turned from his voice.
Years before the U.S. Army
broke his legs in basic training
and fused them for life.

When dust began to fill my father's bones
I learned how chronic arthritis
can lock together any old man.
From the back room I heard my name

and a razor being slapped against leather. With magazines thrown into place
I carried out his clean towels.
I picked up clouds.

Darvil Meets James Brown in Harlem and New Orleans

By Charles Fort

Please, Please, Don't Go

Harlem, 1962. Apollo Theater. Ain't no potato like blackberry jam. Darvil sits three rows and three hours before show time front stage his elephant ears and alligator eyes drift to a black cajun a drummer like a waterfall in the rocky mountain fat back Americana rent party on a twenty four hour street corner rock and roll born and stamped grade A by the bastard blues and subway humming birds feed on race records found sunny side up on a brownstone Victrola 78's thrown to a black bottom mama by a big daddy in a nine piece suit woven in Harlem renaissance fire hydrant hot sauce hand out by a social worker in a farmer's market mango pie in the glove compartment of a three story cadillac collards in every black ass pot a green banana in every two door garage mast head alley cat wrecking crew in grand central station grease on the ankle shoe shine pullman porter on a bag pipe anchors away on a continent of the five and dime window cleaner on the fifty-ninth floor juke joint catfish band in New Orleans. "Try Me", 1982. Mississippi Queen floats on a red river midnight saxophone like a full moon carousel of bourbon and beer baroque barbeque goat ribs alligator pie Mardi Gras mambo street car lizard smokes a Cuban cigar five minutes to show time ain't no potato like blackberry jam.

Race War

By Charles Fort

We are carnal sinners blown about forever
like Hell proper's *Paolo* and *Francesca*.
We are face to face. We are reaching out
but we are not alive anymore, nothing like love
here tonight between races that moan, rocks that rise,
and a kindness that wounds and aches and whimpers.
This is a moment in history that refuses
to sit still, and our hands become great serpents
in a battle without victory. In this southern town
we exchange blows on our shapeless faces
until our eyes meet like playmates in a meadow.
We are children of circumstance, slave ships and reckless stars,
and there are few hours left in this world that "we may rise
on stepping stones taking our dead selves to higher things".
We lead each other away from each other
odd and sightless creatures.
This moment is against us. Ripe and cunning,
earth is not sufficient and earth is our only companion.

*lines 15 (we may rise) and 16 (on stepping) from Tennyson's, "In Memoriam"

The Town Clock Burning

By Charles Fort

The clock positions each of us
in one square block behind the church.
Nothing has counted more and year after year
we march as it tells us to march.

This half-sleeping clock falters.
Its pendulum craves motion and time
As powder and flame shadow each face
we guard what it tells us to guard.

Does this half-stepping helmsman
know how a holy war begins?
What bell shaped terror? What moan? What hour
we stop when it tells us to stop?

This is the clock of boundaries marking its descent as its final seconds
pass into history and without pause
we harm what it tells us to harm.

PRESENTER

Charles Fort. Holds the Paul W. Reynolds and Clarice Kingston Reynolds Chair in Poetry at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. Literary Awards include, The Writer's Voice Poetry Award, MacDowell Fellow, Poetry Society of America Award, Randall Jarrell Poetry Award and International Black Writers Conference. Fort's books include, "The Town Clock Burning", St. Andrews Press, 1985, reprinted by Carnegie Mellon University Press, a Carnegie Mellon Classic Contemporary, 1991, and "Darvil", prose poems, St. Andrews Press, 1993. Fort's work also appears in "The Georgia Review", "A New Geography of Poets", "The Carnegie Mellon Anthology of Poetry", and "Letters to America: Contemporary American Poetry on Race", published by Wayne State University Press. Fort has published variant sonnets under five translations by Edouard Roditi for Plein Chant of France, Argo (published in England, Israel and America), a prose poem in "Poem International Journal", and a poem in La Carta De Oliver (under translation) in Argentina. Fort has recently published in: "The American Poetry Review" (Philadelphia) six poems titled, "Poe's Daughter," "Honey Child," "How Had They Lived," "Understudy," "Black Cat," and "Work for Life in the City." "The Prose Poem: An International Journal", a publication of Providence College, a poem entitled "T.S. Elliot Was A Negro." Poems appear in "Urbanus" (RalZirr No. 60, San Francisco) including "Love," "Red Neck Soup," and "Reunion." Fort's poems are included in the "Emily Dickinson Anthology Awards," the "Crab Orchard Review," and in the anthology: "Immortelles: Poems About Life And Death by New Southern Writers," New Orleans. Fort received his Master of Fine Arts degree from Bowling Green State University.